

Eric Cook: Teaching Statement

Experience

During my time in graduate school, I have had the opportunity to develop as a teacher in two distinct roles. The first of these was as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) for two of the core Masters' level courses in the School of Information, SI504: Social Systems and Collections, and SI500: Information in Social Systems: Collections, Flows and Processing. In each of these courses, I was part of a teaching team tasked with unifying a diverse body of information and social science theories and literature to provide new Masters' students with the core concepts that would guide them through the rest of their time at SI. As a GSI in these two courses, I led multiple weekly discussion sections; in each course, the team GSIs collectively designed the lesson plans and in-class activities for these sessions. I also assisted in assignment development and rubric design, as well as grading assignments, and providing student feedback and mentoring during weekly office hours.

My second role was that of Graduate Student Mentor (GSM). This position serves as a type of "lead" GSI at Michigan, helping graduate instructors in improving their teaching skills and professional development. As the GSM, I planned and conducted multiple GSI orientation and training sessions. I also conducted midterm in-class observation and student feedback sessions for School of Information GSIs.

As a GSI, I received consistently high ratings from students (4.75, 4.83, 4.77, 4.88; all out of 5.0); details about the evaluations are below. I am proud to note that my success in both these roles was recognized at both the School and University Level. In 2008, I received the School of Information's Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor award; in 2009 I received a University of Michigan Rackham Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor award.

Teaching Evaluations

Fall 2006: *SI504 Social Systems and Collections* (All reviews out of 5.0)

	Section 1	Section 2
Overall, the GSI was an excellent teacher	4.75	4.83
The GSI had a thorough knowledge of the subject	4.83	4.94
The GSI was willing to meet and help students outside of class	4.83	4.94
Students felt comfortable asking questions	4.75	4.77
Students difficulty with the material was recognized	4.50	4.55

Fall 2007: SI500 Information in Social Systems: Collections, Flows and Processing
(All reviews out of 5.0)

	Section 1	Section 2
Overall, the GSI was an excellent teacher	4.88	4.77
The GSI had a thorough knowledge of the subject	4.83	4.83
The GSI was willing to meet and help students outside of class	4.83	4.67
Students felt comfortable asking questions	4.88	4.70
Students difficulty with the material was recognized	4.40	4.07

Philosophy

Scaffolding¹, the construction of open-ended situations and learning materials to support and direct students in obtaining mastery of course material, serves as a central organizing concept for my teaching. The concept of scaffolding serves to illuminate three guiding themes in my experiences as a graduate student instructor and graduate student mentor: 1) *contextualizing* learning objectives, 2) leveraging *diversity* and 3) encouraging *ownership* of the educational experience.

The School of Information's curriculum and mission emphasize both professional training and the transfer of theoretical knowledge. In my teaching, I bridge these two goals by leading activities and discussions grounded in theory, but also *contextualized* through specific real world settings and problems. For example, in SI500, I led my students in an analysis of the individual and organizational challenges of distance education via a case study of Second Life. This case illustrated the types of evaluations and tradeoffs that information professionals must make. In another example, I had my students role-play the various stakeholders in the estate of James Joyce in order to ground the legal and moral issues underpinning current copyright debates. When I conduct GSI orientations as a GSM, I encourage the active exchange of experience between seasoned and novice GSIs. I also have the GSIs role-play and analyze a set of common student issues drawn directly from SI courses in years past. These approaches provide a direct personal context in which the new GSIs can frame their questions and concerns. These types of case studies and exercises are not intended to present the students with an easy set of answers. Rather, by constructing situations that move between the abstract and the empirical, I help learners see the applicability and the boundaries of course concepts.

¹ Pea, R. D. (2004). The social and technological dimensions of "scaffolding" and related theoretical concepts for learning, education and human activity. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 13(3), 423-451.

Activities such as these also allow me to support multiple learning styles, moving students between individual and group work, discussion and design, recall and synthesis. Through this, the *diversity* of the students in each setting (cognitive, experiential and demographic) becomes a set of resources that I can draw upon as an instructor. I have found that leveraging this diversity serves the educational objectives of both the individual and the larger course. In the case of the individual, the student is able to bring their own set of training and personal experiences to bear on the material, whether they are a 56-year-old woman from the Midwest returning to school after 30 years in the work force, or a 22-year-old Chinese ESL student arriving in the US for the first time. In the case of the course, making the diverse interpretations and applications of class concepts visible to all students demonstrates the value, depth and connections between concepts.

In a related notion, I seek to lead learners away from viewing their educational experience as something that is passive and consumptive. Rather, I encourage students toward a greater sense of *ownership*, both of course material and of their educational experience as whole. In doing so, we are training students not only in current skills or sets of facts, but in strategies for understanding and problem-solving that will prepare them to be life-long learners and adapt to the changing needs of the marketplace. I often told my students to consider the theoretical material in SI500 and SI504 as providing them with a “conceptual toolkit.” With this toolkit analogy, I conveyed to the students that I was not providing them with a completed and closed narrative in the course, but rather a set of building blocks that would serve them in future settings unforeseen by learners or instructors.

Deployed appropriately, technology also presents new opportunities for fostering student ownership of their education, and I have used this to my advantage in several courses. For example, in SI504 and SI500, students were encouraged to post stories and comments to a course blog throughout the term. Instructors seeded and directed the conversation, but did not dominate it – the dialogue was *owned* by the teachers and learners alike. This type of technology-mediated discourse facilitates a more open-ended engagement with the material, and expands consideration of the course concepts beyond the four walls of classroom.

I believe that the best teaching is not a form of content delivery, but rather the construction of situations in which learning can take place. This does not mean simply pushing the responsibility for learning onto the student’s lap. Rather, it denotes a shift to a more collaborative role for the instructor, serving not as dispenser of wisdom, but rather as guide, wayfinder and learning partner. By contextualizing theory, leveraging multiple forms of diversity and encouraging a sense of ownership, I create scaffolding that will help my students thrive in their educational careers and beyond.